

Rules for Thee, Not for Me: Western Hypocrisy in Nuclear Weapons Rules

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Abstract - Formally rooted in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the international effort to limit nuclear arms claims has broad applicability. Yet observations from scholars in the West alongside voices across the Global South point to gaps - between declared aims and actual practice. Structural imbalances shape the system, where power dynamics often guide decisions more than consistent rules do. Response severity tends to shift depending on alliances when treaty breaches arise. After leaving treaties, some countries advance nukes without an equivalent reaction. Nations choosing disarmament follow paths distinct from those building arsenals, revealing unequal consequences over time. Privilege within the NPT framework belongs by default to certain states, while constraints fall elsewhere - this contrast feeds skepticism. This paper suggests that while older nuclear powers upgrade capabilities, they call for caution from newcomers - a contradiction not easily overlooked. Responses across nations shift more under alliances and strategic value than strict principles. When precedent aligns too closely with existing hierarchies, belief in balance erodes. Stability in non-proliferation rests less on rules alone, but on whether fairness appears real. A structure seen as favoring control rather than shared standards may slowly lose its hold on trust, willingness, and joint effort.

Key Words: NPT, nuclear non-proliferation, double standards, disarmament, geopolitics,

1. Introduction

Signed in 1968, entering into effect two years later, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons forms a foundation for global efforts against the spread. Held by 191 nations today, few arms accords have seen broader acceptance across time. From its core emerges an exchange - states without such weapons vow never to seek them; those possessing them commit, under obligation, toward eventual elimination. Meanwhile, every participant receives rights tied to civilian nuclear technology development.

Still, fifty years under the NPT, reveal stark contrasts between its ideals and how it functions in practice. Where Western powers hold influence, nuclear capabilities often meet quiet acceptance - or even support - depending on alliances (Sagan, 1996-97). In contrast, nations viewed as rivals encounter strong resistance, whether through sanctions, isolation, or force. Decisions shift less by rules than by geopolitical alignment (Ruble, 2009).

This work reviews several key instances commonly mentioned within the critique. Structural imbalances built into the NPT receive scrutiny in part two. Instead of cooperation, division shapes much of NATO's joint nuclear arrangements, explored next. Attention shifts toward Israel's unacknowledged weapons stockpile, alongside international tolerance of it. Selective application emerges clearly when examining Iran, a nation

bound by the agreement yet singled out. Looking ahead, Section 6 treats North Korea's path as an instance of punishment through separation. In contrast, Section 7 explores how Pakistan and India, outside the NPT framework, avoided similar levels of external demand. Then again, Section 8 returns to Ukraine's choice to give up weapons via the Budapest deal, along with what followed. From another angle, Section 9 reviews continuous upgrades to nuclear capabilities in Western nations. Meanwhile, Section 10 brings together evidence of uneven responses, calling into question long-term trust in non-proliferation rules. Finally, Section 11 brings the discussion to a rest.

2. How the Nuclear Treaty Divides Nations

Beginning any thoughtful look at Western contradictions on nuclear arms control requires attention to how the agreement was built, since its structure accepts imbalance. The arrangement grants lasting advantage to nations testing atomic bombs before a specific moment. A clause within Section IX sets this rule: a country qualifies as possessing such weapons only if it detonated one before January 1, 1967. That instant in time locked in superiority for exactly five governments - the U.S., the USSR (later Russia), Britain, France, and China - because they acted first. From that point forward, their status stayed protected under formal terms.

Among global oversight bodies, one agency handles verification within a framework tied to nonproliferation rules. Its structure applies differing levels of scrutiny - some based on choice, others mandatory. Facilities in certain nations follow optional guidelines, even when those states possess officially acknowledged nuclear arms. Elsewhere, every material linked to such technology undergoes strict review. This arrangement rests on an evident principle: some countries must abandon capabilities, while others continue developing openly.

Half a century after signing, the five recognised nuclear-weapon states still hold atomic weapons. Though Article VI of the NPT commits them to pursue negotiations in good faith toward halting the nuclear arms race and achieving disarmament, progress remains minimal. Modernisation efforts by some nations contrast sharply with their stated commitments. According to Acton and Perkovich (2009), adherence to non-proliferation loses weight unless matched by genuine movement on disarmament - yet this balance has long been avoided. At review conferences, tensions surface regularly when non-aligned countries argue that one core promise of the treaty now lies unfulfilled. What was meant as a mutual obligation appears increasingly uneven in practice.

3. NATO Nuclear Sharing: A Key Exception

A moment stands out when considering Western double standards on nuclear arms: the pact among NATO countries to share atomic capabilities. At six locations throughout Europe - situated in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and

Turkey - American B61 bombs remain stationed under US control. During wartime scenarios, warplanes operated by pilots from those nations, yet not American personnel, might carry out bombing runs using such ordnance.

It stands clear: friction exists between NATO practices and the Non-Proliferation Treaty. While Article I bars nuclear-armed states from handing over warheads or authority over their use, Article II stops non-nuclear nations from accepting such items. In conflict conditions, shared planning may shift command functions temporarily - this detail fuels debate. One point draws attention: aircrews from certain member countries could drop munitions still classified under American ownership just before deployment. Legal ambiguity lingers around that instant of transition.

Should nuclear arms persist, so too will the alliance's reliance on them - a stance made clear in NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept. Peace through strength remains the stated aim, with deterrence framed as a means to resist pressure and ward off attack. Rather than scaling back, upgrades continue; the B61 now evolves into a precision-guided form known as the B61-12. Such moves signal continuity, not retreat, in how certain powers assert strategic distinction via deployed warheads.

4. Israel's Unacknowledged Nukes and Global Diplomacy

Known for holding nuclear arms without acknowledgment, Israel stands apart in global non-proliferation discussions. Outside the NPT entirely, its position often surfaces when scrutiny falls on uneven application of rules (Associated Press [AP], 2023a). Not a signatory to the treaty, it refrains from stating either way about weapon development. Facilities tied to such programs remain beyond IAEA oversight, by design. Silence as strategy - this approach began decades ago, quietly backed at times by Washington. While others face pressure, that quiet continues, shaped less by accident than calculation.

Throughout history, U.S. diplomacy has consistently shielded Israel's nuclear activities. Back in 1969, an unspoken agreement allegedly formed between President Nixon and Prime Minister Golda Meir. Under it, Washington would refrain from challenging Israel's weapons development - provided Tel Aviv avoided open declarations or test explosions. Such restraint allowed Israel to remain outside the reach of certain clauses in the Atomic Energy Act. Otherwise, those rules might have triggered withdrawal of American military and financial support (Kroenig, 2018).

What stands out most is how differently Iran and other states are treated. Though part of the NPT treaty, Tehran has allowed oversight by international monitors, opened sites for review, and taken part in prolonged talks about atomic activities. In comparison, one nation remains outside the agreement, denies any inspection of its reactors, including those at a known desert location. Despite these actions - or lack thereof - one faces trade penalties, warnings of force, and persistent calls to remove key installations. The other encounters silence from major powers across Europe and North America when similar concerns arise.

5. Iran Faces Uneven Application of Rules Despite Treaty Membership

What unfolds with Iran's nuclear efforts stands opposite to Israel's situation: here is a nation operating inside the NPT system yet facing persistent global demands seen by some as disproportionate. Were such conduct found among nations

aligned with the West, observers note, responses might differ greatly. Repeated inspection requests emerge from the IAEA - along with insistence on precise material records and rule adherence. This strict oversight forms a pattern many view as far more rigid than what similar allies encounter under comparable conditions.

In 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action came into effect, limiting key parts of Iran's nuclear work for relief from penalties. Verified multiple times by the IAEA, Tehran met its obligations under the deal until Washington exited alone in 2018. Once American penalties returned, restrictions weakened - nuclear efforts previously held back began again (Arms Control Association, 2024).

Notable aspects of unequal treatment toward Iran stand out clearly. While holding a valid NPT status, Tehran encounters pressures rare among peers within the treaty framework. Despite pulling out of the JCPOA, a move prompting limited resumption of nuclear work, Washington framed its exit as a reaction instead of a trigger. Demands from the IAEA regarding inspections and adherence stretch further than those placed on most nations under similar oversight arrangements.

Despite identical enrichment processes, location shapes response. Uranium from Iran faces scrutiny unlike material from Japan, Germany, or the Netherlands. What changes is not the law, but global power dynamics. Perception shifts based on geography, not treaty wording. Legal texts remain neutral; political context does not. Treatment diverges where diplomacy intervenes. Not rules, but relationships define outcomes.

6. North Korea Faces Isolation Following Exit From Treaty

From 1985 onward, North Korea belonged to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Tensions emerged due to disagreements on IAEA oversight at facilities possibly involved in hidden atomic activities. By 2003, departure became final - linked directly to claims of antagonistic U.S. actions undermining national safety. Once outside, weapons testing followed, each attempt more advanced than before. Isolation deepened rapidly; few examples match its trajectory post-exit.

Midway through the 2010s, global restrictions on North Korea ranked some of the broadest ever imposed, covering nearly every major form of commerce, monetary activity, along with cross-border economic engagement. Unlike nations acquiring atomic arms beyond the NPT system yet avoiding widespread diplomatic isolation - such as Pakistan, India, or Israel - the difference stands clear. Still, such divergence draws little official comment.

What stands out about criticism of how North Korea is handled lies less in severity than in contrast - how much tougher it faces compared to others who did similar things. Though Pakistan carried out nuclear tests in 1998, penalties from Washington lasted only a short time; afterward, cooperation grew sharply once counterterrorism priorities shifted post-2001, aid resumed, and support increased. In India's case, despite its own 1998 tests, recognition followed years later - not formally, yet clearly - through a civil nuclear deal with America by 2008 (Sokolski, 2012).

7. Pakistan and India Outside NPT With Uneven Global Acceptance

Pakistan holds nuclear arms; so does India, neither being part of the NPT. While both stand beyond the treaty framework, Israel also remains outside it, yet armed - an arrangement frequently cited when questioning consistency in how non-proliferation demands are enforced by Western states.

In the timeline of non-proliferation efforts, one shift stands apart: the 2008 civil nuclear deal between the United States and India. Though India did not sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, entry to American civilian nuclear resources followed. Access included technology, material, and fuel normally restricted under global norms. Later, an exception emerged within the Nuclear Suppliers Group. That group permitted commerce with India, bypassing standard treaty requirements. Such approval allowed member states to supply nuclear goods regardless of India's treaty position. No prior case matches this level of inclusion for a nation outside the NPT framework.

Opposition emerged from experts like Sokolski alongside groups such as the Arms Control Association, who claimed the agreement weakened global efforts to block nuclear spread. Their point: countries might now see a path where building atomic arms beyond the NPT leads not to isolation but to partnership. Though barred from joining the treaty, one nation gained access anyway - setting a precedent others noticed (Sokolski, 2012). Islamabad sought similar terms afterward. Washington refused, pointing instead to past actions involving banned transfers. Specifically mentioned was an operation led by A.Q. Khan that moved sensitive materials to states like Libya, Iran, and North Korea - an episode shaping later decisions.

How one nation fares versus another inside the non-NPT group tells a story. Though both stand outside the treaty, their paths diverge sharply. One - seen as balancing regional power and offering market promise - found room at the table. The other, burdened by alliances that raise concern and past actions on weapons spread, did not receive similar leniency. Within the same bracket, outcomes differ because strategic worth matters more than measured danger. What shapes response is less about how risky a nuclear program appears and more about who holds it. A state's usefulness alters how strictly rules are applied. Even among equals on paper, treatment reveals hierarchy beneath. That gap signals something deeper: alignment often outweighs arms restraint when decisions form.

8. Ukraine and the Budapest Memorandum: What Disarming Led To

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, Ukraine held the planet's third-biggest stockpile of nuclear arms. Following that moment, talks unfolded slowly; by late 1994, an agreement called the Budapest Memorandum took shape. Signed by Ukraine, Russia, the U.S., and Britain, it outlined terms quietly but firmly. Kyiv committed to sending its warheads to Moscow for destruction. Also required was joining the Non-Proliferation Treaty without nukes. Those who signed promised not to threaten or attack Ukraine. Respect for borders and independence stood at the core of their pledge. No guarantees about military help were included, just assurances written plainly.

Despite promises made when Ukraine gave up nuclear weapons, Russia took control of Crimea in 2014. Later, a broad assault began in February 2022, breaking prior security understandings.

The U.S. and Britain had signed those guarantees, yet they offered aid only after the conflict emerged. Military backing, financial help, and shared information followed over time. Still, such support was never framed as an immediate response clause meant to block aggression. Deterrence failed because consequences were not clearly predefined. Trust relied on goodwill rather than enforceable terms.

Serious consequences emerge from how the Ukrainian situation affects efforts to prevent nuclear spread. States without atomic arms see what happened there - giving up major existing capabilities meant little when survival came into question. Security promises tied to disarmament appear fragile under such conditions. Nations near stronger adversaries equipped with warheads may draw sharp conclusions. Their strategic thinking shifts when precedents like this become visible. What seems like adherence to global rules can still leave countries exposed. A decision made decades ago now echoes in current risk assessments elsewhere. Fewer illusions exist today about protection offered through treaties alone. Past expectations around safety guarantees look less convincing after Kyiv's choice. Where trust weakens, alternative options gain attention quietly. One precedent sets weightier examples than many diplomatic assurances combined. Reliance on others' commitments becomes harder to justify internally. Historical context reshapes present calculations in capitals facing similar threats. Deterrence logic regains relevance where doubts grow about alliance reliability. Surrendered weapons cannot be reclaimed once removed. Lessons absorbed do not always align with the intentions behind non-proliferation campaigns. Outcomes matter more than stated principles during moments of crisis. Decisions taken under pressure reflect perceived realities, not ideals. The shadow of past choices extends into future defence planning across regions.

9. Western Nuclear Programs Balance Restriction Rhetoric With Modernization Efforts

Despite calling for limits, openness, among nations elsewhere, the United States, Britain, and France - each holding recognised nuclear status under the NPT - are advancing deep upgrades to their atomic capabilities. Spending on American nuclear systems may reach about 756 billion dollars between 2023 and 2032, according to projections released by Congress's budget office last year (Congressional Budget Office [CBO], 2023). Among central components now taking shape: a new intercontinental missile named Sentinel, an underwater vessel known as the Columbia class designed to launch ballistic missiles, a next-generation bomber called B-21 Raider built for evasion, a precision-guided gravity weapon designated B61-12, along with a powerful air-deployed cruise missile intended for distant strikes.

Now rising, the United Kingdom has raised its limit on warheads - breaking from prior commitments aimed at steady reductions. Not aligned with any bloc, France keeps its own nuclear shield using sea-based and airborne arms, now upgrading each component through a broad renewal effort (Delpech, 2012).

It stands unclear why updates within Western arsenals should count as distinct from actions taken elsewhere - especially when such changes include advanced modifications rather than simple replacements. What emerges in place of older models is not just updated machinery but altered function. Though framed as upkeep, the shift to the B61-12 introduces guidance technology absent before. This version finds its mark more precisely than

the unguided bombs once standard. Greater precision alters how planners might assign missions, broadening what kinds of locations could become objectives. In some assessments, tighter targeting may influence decisions about deployment due to lower unintended effects nearby. Alongside this, comes the Long Range Standoff weapon - a platform newly introduced into service. Its purpose spans far beyond replacement - it ensures aircraft-based deterrence remains active well into future decades. Rather than preserving the status quo performance, these developments push operational boundaries further. Each step forward adjusts not only hardware but expectations around use. Such progress moves past routine support tasks into territory resembling advancement. Functionally, shifts like these shape potential conflict scenarios differently than prior configurations.

NATO declares its continued status as a nuclear alliance contingent upon the global presence of such arms, citing reliance on them for deterrence. In contrast stands the expectation imposed on certain nations by Western powers: Iran must cease enriching uranium, North Korea must surrender every part of its atomic stockpile under verification, and others must exercise self-restraint in their capabilities. Yet within this framework, an expansive modernisation effort persists, designed to uphold American nuclear combat strength well into the decade of the 2080s. Though differing contexts are claimed, the imbalance in expectations draws noticeable lines across policy applications.

10. The Pattern of Selective Tolerance and Its Consequences

What appears across these examples cannot be dismissed as a coincidence. Each reflects an underlying pattern - one rarely spoken aloud - where the weight of non-proliferation demands shifts depending on how closely a country aligns with Western-centered global structures, rather than measured adherence to shared rules. Though never formally declared, these dynamic shapes outcome. The scrutiny faced by nations varies, guided less by consistent standards and more by strategic positioning within wider power arrangements.

One way to see this dynamic involves how certain nations receive different treatment under global rules. Iran and North Korea encounter intense scrutiny, regardless of legal distinctions in their actions compared to accepted cases. When a nation follows the agreed terms - take Ukraine as an example - it does not necessarily obtain matching protection guarantees. Such outcomes may shape decisions by other governments later on. What emerges is less about uniform standards, more about shifting political alignments (Mueller & Schmidt, 2008).

10.1 Damaged Regime Legitimacy

What follows first from selective tolerance is harm to how legitimate the non-proliferation system appears. Because legitimacy allows rules and organizations to secure adherence without relying solely on force. Though enforcement clearly favors some - applied strictly to weaker rivals, yet overlooked among strong allies - the standing of such principles declines. Visible signs appear in how NPT Review Conferences operate, where consensus on final texts falters due to resistance from non-Western nations. These states often see non-proliferation rhetoric as tilted, shaped more by geopolitical bias than shared responsibility. The agreement collapsed in both 2005 and 2022, left without unified conclusions. Though the process continues, trust remains uneven across regions.

10.2 Incentive Effects on Countries Considering Nuclear Weapons

When some states face leniency based on their choices, it shapes risky expectations for those still deciding about nuclear arms. Survival after acquiring such weapons appears possible when observing past cases. Severe penalties failed to stop North Korea once its program advanced beyond reversal points. Despite refusing treaty commitments, India later gained access to civilian nuclear trade under unique terms. Nuclear development by Israel occurred without facing any meaningful external resistance afterward. Historical outcomes suggest adherence may offer fewer benefits than pursuing capabilities first (Gartzke & Jo, 2009).

A careful observer within national defense strategy might infer that deterrence stems from nuclear arms, while restraint without them brings uncertain benefits. Exactly such reasoning, the global control system meant to challenge, now faces a weakened impact due to uneven enforcement practices. Though intended balance shifts when rules apply only sometimes.

10.3 The North-South Dimension

With the start of 2021 came enforcement of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, shaped largely by nations across the Global South. Their motivation emerged clearly: a lack of progress by nuclear-armed states, especially those aligned with Western powers, in fulfilling commitments made through the NPT. Participation remains absent among the five official nuclear weapons states recognized by that earlier treaty. In place of engagement stands resistance; each has refused signature or approval. Encouragement toward nonparticipation extends beyond them, reaching allied countries as well.

11. Conclusion

What emerges from these examples' points toward an observation both clear in logic and awkward in practice: adherence to non-proliferation rules often depends on global power ties. Not one challenge has disrupted the status of the original nuclear powers under the treaty framework. Instead, cooperation within military alliances allows certain nations access to atomic weapons without official designation. Meanwhile, a nation outside the declared order maintains its capabilities through long-standing political backing. Such patterns do not reflect neutral enforcement. Rather, they reveal how international expectations shift based on strategic relationships. From beginning to end, the system treats similar actions differently when friends are involved. Should Iran pursue nuclear capabilities, it encounters scrutiny rarely applied to allies doing the same. When North Korea left a key agreement, isolation followed - though its reasons may have included legitimate fears. Pakistan gained limited acceptance beyond treaty frameworks; India found full tolerance despite similar steps. Ukraine gave up weapons, only to find promises hollow when tested. While others upgrade warheads quietly, certain states insist on limits for the rest.

This stance does not claim the non-proliferation system acts only from self-interest, nor does it deny its tangible outcomes. Early detection of suspect nuclear efforts has emerged through safeguard mechanisms. Within the NPT structure, dialogue now and then leads to measurable restraint. Though limited, such effects exist (Ruble, 2009).

Yet the sustainability of the system now faces mounting strain due to uneven enforcement of non-proliferation rules. Over

time, inconsistent practices have worn down trust in its fairness. Where adherence should bring clear benefit, outcomes instead appear arbitrary. Meanwhile, the division between the Global North and the Global South over nuclear oversight has deepened unexpectedly. Though built separately, the TPNW signals how many nations perceive the current order as unable to uphold neutral, consistent standards despite such promises.

Should the non-proliferation system regain standing, its future depends less on declarations than actions. Where norms are cited universally yet enforced unevenly, trust erodes - particularly when alliances shape outcomes. Consistency must guide pressure, not convenience, across every region and relationship. Progress under Article VI cannot remain symbolic if obligations are to mean anything at all. A structure that excludes certain actors weakens the whole; the inclusion of Israel within regional frameworks becomes unavoidable. Security assurances for nations without weapons require renewal, so restraint carries tangible value. Without adjustments, adherence may seem futile rather than foundational.

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